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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the evaluative criteria or schemata that voters use in making decisions about competing candidates. More specifically, the study sought to determine (1) whether the criteria that voters employ differ between the candidates, and (2) the relative importance of various candidate-specific criteria in the voting decision process. It was hypothesized that, in contrast to the traditional view of a unitary voter decision process, with one candidate compared to another using a general standard criterion for candidate acceptability, there existed multiple criteria unique to each candidate as part of the evaluative process. The 277 undergraduate students in the study were given 29 credibility scales to complete in response to the 1980 United States Presidential candidates Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, an ideality scale for each, and a projected voter behavior scale. Data emerging from the research were submitted to factor analysis and discriminant analysis. The results of the study supported the idea of unique criteria being employed in the evaluation of each individual candidate, suggesting a more complex model of voting behavior than the traditional view previously advanced. (RL)

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Comparative Evaluation of Political Candidates: Implications for the Voter Decision Making Process

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the nature of comparative political candidate evaluation. While the traditional view advocates a unitary voter decision process, with one candidate compared to another using a general standard criterion for candidate acceptability, this research looked at the possibility of multiple criteria unique to each candidate as part of the evaluative process. Undergraduate students were given twenty-nine credibility scales to complete in response to the two of the 1980 Presidential candidates, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, as well as an ideality scale for each and a projected voter behavior scale. Data emerging from the research were submitted to factor analysis and discriminant analysis. The results of the study supported the idea of unique criteria being employed in the evaluation of each individual candidate, suggesting a more complex model of voting behavior than the traditional view heretofore has advanced.

Comparative Evaluation of Political Candidates: Implications for the Voter Decision Making Process

Introduction

In any election voters must assess the relative acceptability of available candidates. This evaluating process ultimatly results in an intention to vote for a specific candidate; for example, the selection of Candidate A over Candidate B. The majority of political science studies suggest that a voter makes a unitary decision in this process, one that reflects a preference for one candidate over another (Nimmo & Savage, 1976). For instance, Kelley and Mirer (1974) developed the "voter's decision rule" as a plausible explanation of the process an individual voter engages in during such a decision:

> The voter canvasses his likes and dislikes of the leading candidates and major parties involved in the election. Weighting each like and dislike equally, he votes for the candidate toward whom he has the greatest number of favorable attitudes, if there is such a candidate. If no candidate has such an advantage, the voter votes consistently with his party affiliation, if he has one. If his attitudes do not incline him toward one candidate more than toward another, and if he does not identify with one of the major parties, the voter reaches a null decision (p. 574).

The purpose of this study was to examine the evaluative criteria or schemata voters use in making decisions about competing candidates. More specifically, this study sought to determine whether the criteria voters employ differ between the candidates and the relative importance of various candidate-specific criteria in the voting decision process.

Methodology

The 277 subjects employed in this study were undergraduate students of voting age at a large western University. A questionnaire was administered to all subjects during a regularly scheduled class session within two weeks prior to the 1980 general election. The instructions indicated to subjects that their participation was entirely voluntary and that the data would remain confidential and unattributed.

The questionnaire was composed of three sections. In the first part of the questionnaire subjects were asked to rate the two leading 1980 presidential candidates, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, on twenty-nine semantic differential scales designed to assess the perceived credibility of public figures (McCroskey, Jensen, and Todd, 1972). Next, subjects were asked to indicate their likely voting preference. Finally, subjects judged each candidate in terms of how close they were to their ideal candidate.

The data derived from the questionnaire administration were submitted to two statistical procedures: (1) principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation to determine the factor structures that subjects employed for each candidate; and (2) stepwise discriminant analysis to assess the ability of the credibility scales and the ideality scales to predict candidate preference.

In order for a factor to be considered for subsequent analysis, it was required to contain a minimum of two scales that met the inclusion criteria of a primary loading of .55 or greater and a secondary loading of no greater than .40. An eigenvalue of less than 1.0 resulted in termination of factor extraction.

Results

Five dimensions of credibility emerged as a result of the factor analysis for Carter, while the analysis revealed only two credibility factors for Reagan. The Carter factor structure accounted for 90.9% of the variance and the Reagan factor structure accounted for 75.2% of total variance.

(Insert Table I)

Comparing the two factor structures, it is evident that the fourth Carter dimension is identical to the second Reagan dimension. Though the items are not identical, the first Reagan dimension appears to be a composite of the first and fifth dimensions for Carter. The factor structure for Reagan lacks any of Carter's

extroversion items.

The initial stepwise discriminant analysis was performed using the Carter credibility scales to test the classification of subjects into voting groups. Among the Carter voters, 81.30% of the subjects were classified correctly, among the Reagan voters, 81.60% of the subjects were classified correctly; overall, 81.48% of actual voting intention was appropriately predicted.

The second stepwise discriminant analysis was performed using the Reagan credibility scales to test the proper classification of subjects into voting groups. Among the Carter voters, 84.20% of the subjects were classified correctly; among the Reagan voters, 97.60% were classified correctly; overall, 93.33% of the subjects were grouped appropriately.

Table II details the standardized discriminant coefficients for each item derived from the two step-wise discriminant analyses.

(Insert Table II)

In comparing the coefficients for Carter and Reagan, it is evident that: (1) two of the Reagan items were substantially greater discriminators (admirable-contemptible, sociable-unsociable) than any of the Carter items; (2) for seventeen of the twenty-nine items for the candidates the valence of the items was opposite; (3) the difference in discrimination strength between the candidates was often great among the items, with those for Reagan equally frequently high (for example, admirable-contemptible, believable-unbelievable, sociable-unsociable, nice-awful, relaxed-tense) as those for Carter (for example, verbal-quiet, energetic-tired, extroverted-introverted, aggressive-meek, intelligent-unintelligent); and (4) only four items were high discriminators for both candidates (sociable-unsociable, competent-uncompetent, responsible-undependable, reliable-unreliable).

The third stepwise discriminant analysis was performed using the single Carter ideality scale to classify subjects into voting groups. Among the Carter

voters, 70.50% of the subjects were classified correctly; among the Reagan voters, 80.50% of the subjects were classified correctly; overall, 77.10% of the subjects were grouped appropriately.

The fourth stepwise discriminant analysis was performed using the single Reagan ideality scale to classify subjects into voting groups. Among the Carter voters, 88.40% of the subjects were classified correctly; among the Reagan voters, 89.80% of the subjects were classified correctly; overall, 89.31% of the subjects were grouped appropriately.

The final stepwise discriminant analysis was performed using the two ideality scales together in the prediction of voter group membership. Among the Carter voters, 48.90% of the subjects were classified correctly; among the Reagan voters, 79.80% of the subjects were classified correctly; overall, 69.40% of the subjects were grouped appropriately.

For neither ideality scale was the discriminating power for either candidate better than was that for the credibility scales in predicting voting behavior. The combination of the two ideality scales provided a less powerful discriminator than the individual ideality scales.

Discussion

This study was designed to examine the evaluative structures employed by voters in making decisions about political contenders. The traditional view of voter decision behavior suggests that individuals assess one candidate and then the other, determine their voting intention on the basis of some standard, and then vote their preference.

The results of this study suggest a more complex picture of voting behavior. The fact that the factor structures for the candidates were different and the standard discriminant coefficients provided a different ordering of criteria for the

two candidates suggests that voters use dissimilar standards in evaluating opponents prior to placing their mark on a ballot. Not only are the standards somewhat variable, but their discriminating strength is unique for each candidate. The fact that the valence of these criteria is often the opposite for the candidates suggests that the degree to which an attribute exists for a candidate is desired at varying levels. (For example, voters prefer Carter to be more adventurous than cautious, while for Reagan, the opposite is the case). In sum, though these data are only suggestive, this study implicates a model of voting behavior that deserves further conceptual and empirical attention.

References

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Table I

Carter Factor Structure

I		II	
believable-unbelievable	(.66)	verbal-quiet	(.57)
admirable-contemptible	(.64)	talkative-silent	(.59)
reliable-unreliable	(.69)	extroverted-introverted	(.72)
honest-dishonest	(.68)		
responsible-undependable	(.58)		
III		**IV**	
experienced-unexperienced	(.64)	nice-awful	(.57)
trained-untrained	(.71)	kind-cruel	(.66)
		good-natured-irritable	(.68)

V

intellectual-narrow	(.66)
intelligent-unintelligent	(.59)

Reagan Factor Structure

I		II	
experienced-inexperienced	(.60)	nice-awful	(.67)
believable-unbelievable	(.74)	kind-cruel	(.70)
admirable-contemptible	(.72)	good-natured-irritable	(.58)
reliable-unreliable	(.76)		
honest-dishonest	(.59)		
intellectual-narrow	(.69)		
responsible-undependable	(.71)		
competent-incompetent	(.80)		
intelligent-unintelligent	(.68)		

TABLE II

Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients

Scale Item	Carter Coefficient	Reagan Coefficient
experienced-inexperienced	.20371	-.29571
believable-unbelievable	-.07489	-.25869
bold-timid	-.14702	.15944
poised-nervous	-.31883	.24706
attractive-unattractive	.21707	-.11105
sociable-unsociable	-.26504	.43321
admirable-contemptible	-.20851	-.68928
adventurous-cautious	-.20311	.22533
nice-awful	-.05255	.26203
reliable-unreliable	-.25062	.28203
relaxed-tense	-.07592	.27513
good-bad	.09101	-.14730
verbal-quiet	.25909	-.15891
energetic-tired	.28545	-.08953
just-unjust	.12738	.07143
cheerful-gloomy	.14466	.04439
honest-dishonest	-.18400	-.05802
calm-anxious	-.13154	-.21049
intellectual-narrow	-.12419	.01331
talkative-silent	-.03727	-.09681
kind-cruel	-.17601	-.07311
extroverted-introverted	.35554	-.11354
good-natured-irritable	-.00055	-.03810
responsible-undependable	-.29121	-.35078
aggressive-meek	-.32132	-.22164
trained-untrained	.01566	-.06468
competent-incompetent	.26634	-.37066
expert-inexpert	-.22886	-.28344
intelligent-unintelligent	-.32324	.16357